New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 23 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 5, 1955

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Theatre Openings

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Pipe Dream"

New York Post

December 1, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Cannery Row's Musical Citizenry

The new Rodgers and Hammerstein musical play, "Pipe Dream," arrived at the Shubert last night, and that is automatically a theatrical event of high importance. If you will forgive a touch of economics, it is said to have reached town with an advance box-office sale that puts it into the millionaire category, which makes what the reviewers will have to say about it today a fairly academic matter. This may possibly be just as well, because "Pipe Dream," although it has some fine Richard Rodgers songs, hardly reveals the Masters at the peak of their distinguished form.

Based on John Steinbeck's novel, "Sweet Thursday," which deals with the concerns of the lovable but disreputable guys and dolls of Monterey County's Cannery Row, the narrative has the advantage of possessing some of the warmth and affection for amiable riffraff that Mr. Steinbeck can make so engaging. But it is strangely desultory in contemplating the wistful romance between Doc, the impoverished scientist, and Suzy, the virtuous waif, and it wanders along a little aimlessly while it is waiting for the songs and dances to make their enlivening appearance.

The Music

When the songs do come along, they are usually fresh, pleasant and happily tuneful ones. In such numbers as "All Kinds of People," "A Lopsided Bus," "The Man I Used to Be," "Sweet Thursday" and "How Long?," to name just a few of them, Mr. Rodgers demonstrates his notable touch in such matters, while Mr. Hammerstein's talent for getting a kind of gay colloquial poetry into his lyrics is almost always in evidence. It is at these times that "Pipe Dream" comes to properly entertaining life. But the authors have also brought us to expect a lot in their books.

Their libretto based on "Sweet Thursday" is filled with episodic matters that can be both humorous and touching when set down in the course of a Steinbeck novel. The girls and their buxom madame at the Bear Flag Cafe and the proudly poor denizens of the Palace Flophouse, with their schemes for helping along the faltering love affair of Doc and Suzy, should make for good, racy theatrical material, and frequently they do so. Unfortunately, there are too numerous occasions when they seem merely to take a long time to pass a given point.

The Pro Touch

What helps "Pipe Dream" greatly is that it has such a characteristically professional production. The dances, which aren't numerous, always fit into the text, and they never fail to be lively and imaginative. While it can hardly be said that things swing along dynamically, they are managed with enough skill to make them vivid and entirely believable in creating the atmosphere of Cannery Row. The new show is clearly the work of theater men who know their business. It merely appears oddly lacking in the sense of excitement that had been hoped for.

Of the performers, the one who comes out of the proceedings with the highest credit is young Judy Tyler, who plays Suzy. Miss Tyler has charm, sings attractively and has a nice sense of character. It is clear that she has a future. I had a feeling that Helen Traubel was less than comfortable in the role of the warmhearted madame of the Bear Flag Cafe, but Bill Johnson as Doc and Mike Kellin, G. D. Wallace and John Call as eminent citizens of Cannery Row are of proper help. So are Jo Mielziner's sets. But I can't deny that "Pipe Dream" disappointed me.

"PIPE DREAM"

Musical comedy with book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2d, music by Richard Rodgers, based on the novel "Sweet Thursday" by John Steinbeck; staged by Harold Clurman; settings and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Alvin Colt; dances and musical numbers staged by Boris Runanin; orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett; musical director Salvatore Dell'-Isola; presented by Rodgers and Hammerstein at the Sam S. Shubert Theatre, November 30, 1955. The cast:

Doc.....William Johnson
Hazel.....Mike Kellin
Millicent Henderson..Jayne Heller
Mac.....G. D. Wallace
Suzy.....Judy Tyler
Fauna.....Helen Traubel
Jim Blaikey.....Rufus Smith
Ray Busch.....John Call
George Herman...Guy Raymond
Bill.....Steve Roland
Red.....Keith Kaldenberg
Whitey.....Hobe Strelford
Dizzy.....Nicolas Orloff
Eddie.....Warren Kemmerling
Alec.....Warren Brown
Joe (The Mexican)..Kenneth Harvey
Pancho (A Wetback)...Ruby Braff
Agnes.....Temple Texas
Mable.....Jackie McElroy
Emma.....Marilyn Bradley
Beulah.....Mildred Slavin
Marjorie.....Louise Troy
Cho Cho Sen.....Pat Creighton
Sumi.....Sandra Devlin
Sonny Boy.....Joseph Leon
Esteban (A Wetback).....
Jerry LaZarre
A Waiter.....Kazimir Kokich
Harriet.....Patricia Wilson
Hilda.....Ruth Kobart
Fred.....Marvin Krauter
Slick.....Gene Kevin
Slim.....Don Weissmuller
Bubbles.....Marsha Reynolds
Sonya.....Annabelle Gold
Kitty.....Jenny Workman
Weirde.....Patti Karkalits
Johnny Carriagra...Scotty Engel
Pedro.....Rudolfo Cornejo
Dr. Ormondy....Calvin Thomas

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

December 1, 1955

'Pipe Dream' Large, Handsome, Tuneful, Well Sung, Cumbersome

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The new Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, "Pipe Dream," which opened last evening at the Shubert, combines some of the best and some of the least effective efforts of this famed team of collaborators. It has a couple of grand songs—"All at Once You Love Her" and "The Man I Used to Be"; it has two fine-voiced and attractive young lovers in Judy Tyler and William Johnson, and it has the dubious novelty of presenting the ex-Wagnerian soprano, Helen Traubel, in the role of the madam of an H-house.

It is a big show—big enough, it appeared last evening, to be unwieldy—and for a surprising amount of the time it is dull. Hammerstein and Rodgers are great gentlemen of the musical theatre and perhaps they are too gentlemanly to be dealing with John Steinbeck's sleazy and raffish denizens of Cannery Row, near Monterey, Calif.

A Friendly Home

As extracted from Steinbeck's novel, "Sweet Thursday," "Pipe Dream" concerns itself with Johnson, a marine scientist who is probing the secrets of life in fish tanks, and Miss Tyler, a girl tramp who is no bum. The girl manages to keep herself aloof even when she is taken into the town bordello by the friendly Miss Traubel, and finally makes herself thoroughly unassailable by setting up housekeeping in an abandoned steel boiler. This ultimate retreat finally inflames the emotions of the placid scientist to the point where he crawls in after her and offers his hand in wedlock.

The cast includes the entire community of Cannery Row and the settings range from between a biological laboratory, a flophouse, a pier restaurant and Mme. Traubel's establishment. I felt a little sorry for this lady when she had to sing a paean of praise of her joint called "The Happiest House on the Block." Richard Wagner, of course, got her in a lot of dirty situations—but he wrote in German. Jo Mielziner's sets are pictorially effective and look deceptively simple, but it takes a long time to change them and as a result the various before-the-curtain "in one" scenes often are too long.

Judy Tyler a Find

The Rodgers score is always melodious, nicely varied and satisfyingly highlighted by some outstanding numbers. Robert Russell Bennett's orchestration, however, seems to take no chromatic risks and contents itself with the B. M. B.—the business man's bounce. Hammerstein's lyrics are uniformly admirable, but the story keeps getting in their way.

Miss Tyler, a very pretty girl with a remarkable mezzo voice, is a real find for the musical theatre, and Johnson certainly is the best baritone on Broadway . . . north of 40th St. Miss Traubel is, of course, a fine singer, but she is not the brassy type and will never run Ethel Merman out of business. There is an excellent party dance staged by Boris Runanin, and Alvin Colt's costumes stick closer to Steinbeck than anything else in "Pipe Dream" does. Harold Clurman directed the production.

The New York Times

December 1, 1955

Theatre: Rodgers and Hammerstein

'Pipe Dream' Is Based on Steinbeck Novel

By BROOKS ATKINSON

MR. RODGERS and Mr. Hammerstein have written a pleasant, lazy romance, "Pipe Dream," which opened at the Sam S. Shubert last evening.

The story comes from John Steinbeck's "Sweet Thursday," a saga of sociable vagrants in Cannery Row, where Mr. Steinbeck served time as a suburbanite years ago. Even with Jo Mielziner designing the scenery is not the sort of setting that produces the glamour of the traditional musical show. Nor are the waterfront indigent the sort of characters that Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Hammerstein are most comfortable with. We mustn't expect "Carousel" every season.

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On its own level as romantic entertainment, "Pipe Dream" is tender and entertaining. For Mr. Rodgers has written a beautiful score. And in Judy Tyler and William Johnson he has two young people who know how to sing it. Miss Tyler is a neat and winning young lady with an exciting voice, and Mr. Johnson is a first-rate baritone. All their songs together are delightful. But the song with which they conclude the first act, "All at Once You Love Her," is especially captivating. It is a typically Rodgers song of richness and feeling.

Among the paraphernalia of "Pipe Dream," and of "Sweet Thursday" before it, is a third-rate bordello—standard equipment in any yarn about uncomplicated people. In fiction and the stage it is a useful substitute for originality. Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Hammerstein have improved the formula by casting Helen Traubel as the madame—with a heart of gold, naturally.

In the vernacular of the stage, this is known as "playing against it." Miss Traubel is an illustrious Wagnerian who can belt an aria clear across Times Square. Miss Traubel plays Madame Fauna with thorough good nature and she sings the small, folksy songs Mr. Rodgers has written for her without operatic formality. But the joke of casting a musical heroine as the keeper of a squalid bordello is cute rather than hearty, and it explains why a sharp Bostonian correspondent has inquired of this department: "What's all the Traubel about?"

•

It takes a huge cast to relate this fable of a penurious village on a California waterfront. As usual, the authors and their director, Harold Clurman, have cast the parts with good actors and arranged an agreeable performance. Mike Kellin and G. D. Wallace are the head men in the flophouse gang, able to sing satisfactorily and to hold their own in some tatterdemalion ballets. It is difficult to identify Madame Traubel's girls in the program, but they do look hospitable.

Love on Mr. Steinbeck's Cannery Row resembles love on the musical stage, where it is usually seen at its best advantage. In "Pipe Dream" Mr. Rodgers has written some enchanting music to keep love on a high romantic plane, and Mr. Hammerstein has written his usual effortless verses.

•

In addition to "All at Once You Love Her" the score includes a touching song for Miss Tyler, entitled "Everybody's Got a Home but Me," a meditative song for Mr. Johnson entitled "The Man I Used to Be," a droll anthem for Miss Traubel and her household workers called "The Happiest House on the Block" and some jovial music for the entire population, called "A Lopsided Bus" and "Bum's Opera." As usual, Robert Russell Bennett has written colorful orchestrations in imaginative styles.

"Pipe Dream" represents Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Hammerstein in a minor key. Being professional writers and men of taste, they have made it sweet, pleasant and enjoyable.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 1, 1955

'Pipe Dream' Pleases Gently

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Pipe Dream" reveals the great team of Rodgers and Hammerstein off on a completely new tack.

The Shubert's new musical is based on some of John Steinbeck's Cannery Row characters, a gang living close to the ground on the Pacific Coast. The men inhabit a flophouse because it involves the least possible effort. The girls live in "The Happiest House on the Block," which is also one of the show's happiest songs.

Despite the stars and fine minor performances, the community itself is the center of interest in the show.

Doc is an oceanographic researchist, who is getting crochety from loneliness. Susie is a tough kid, on the bum all her life to escape rough breaks.

The neighborhood, under the leadership of Fauna, madame and ringleader, succeeds in getting the two young people together.

Leisurely . . . Gentle.

Remember that title, "Pipe Dream." Much of the show is leisurely. The songs are gentle. The action is casual except for a few outbursts. It is all about a lazy life that has cast a sure spell over certain people.

Helen Traubel never sings an opera-sized note. As the portly nemesis of the town, she lends a clear, sweet, languorous fireside tone to some lovely melodies like "Happiest House," "All at Once" and "Will You Marry Me?"

Bill Johnson has the air of being agreeably bewitched as the discontented scientist. His songs have a placid virility, as he muses over "The Man I Used To Be" or the lovely "All at Once."

Doll Face.

Susie is played by Judy Tyler, a newcomer to Broadway with a doll face and the inner determination of a youthful policewoman.

The supporting roles are practically all splendid, with Mike Kellin rating particular praise for the dopey, lovable Hazel.

A certain homely swaying beauty of the music pervades the show. It is the sort of score you might hope Stephen Foster would write in the modern idiom.

When the story cuts loose it has an offbeat charm that is unforgettable. One's first view of the flophouse is a fabulous mock rumba, hilariously aped by the cheerful b u,m s. And choreographer Boris Runanin does another beautifully subtle number in the gentle memory of Doc himself when younger.

Triumph of Costuming.

The big ball, in which the very dance hall is auctioned off, is a triumph of inventive costuming by Alvin Colt. It also offers a first-rate look at the cutest face on Broadway, slithering and cavorting with a kelly green scarf about its neck.

The Mielziner sets are fine, most of them transparent outlines of buildings against the blue swirl of Pacific tide pools.

The whole tempo and attack of "Pipe Dream" are different. It is good-humored, never brashly comical. It is gentle, never maudlin. It is like swinging in a hammock that keeps going up, the way a hammock can only do in a good "Pipe Dream."

Daily Mirror

December 1, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Pipe Dream' Is Fine Song and Dancer

• It's no dream of a musical but it'll do until something better comes along.

Had anyone but Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein done "Pipe Dream," it would have been hailed as a pretty good musical. But we have come to expect so much from R&H that we feel let down when they give us less than their very best. And the new tenant of the Shubert Theatre is no masterpiece. It's just a pretty good musical.

Hammerstein based the book on "Sweet Thursday," novel by John Steinbeck. We haven't read the Steinbeck tome, but one who has says it doesn't boast much plot. Just a lot of interesting and more than slightly wacky characters along Cannery Row near Monterey. And that's about the way it comes across the footlights.

NATURALLY, there's a romance. What song-and-dancer would be complete without one? It has to do with an ichthyologist, the good Samaritan of a raffish community, trying to find meaning in his life. This he finally does through a nice girl from a bad environment.

On this slight thread of a story, R&H have hung some vivid and hilarious episodes: in a scientist's shack, a broken-down flophouse and a tawdry bordello. They have been set to a score that we are certain is better than it sounded Wednesday evening. Then it came over as a rather pedestrian sequence of songs.

But don't get the wrong idea—there are several Hit Parade champs in that score. We think you'll be hearing "Everybody's Got a Home But Me," "The Man I Used to Be." "All At Once You Love Her," "Will You Marry Me" and "Sweet Thursday" just about every time you turn on your radio or TV set, or drop a dime in the neighborhood juke box.

CASTING DIRECTOR John Fearnley has found just the right people to bring the Hammerstein-Steinbeck characters to life, and to do justice to the Hammerstein lyrics and Rodgers' music. There's Helen Traubel, for instance, as a salty, good-hearted mistress of a bevy of filles de joie.

Mme. Traubel, once one of the Met's greatest Wagnerian sopranos, has dropped her dignity for the nonce, to have a high old time of it along Skid Row. Instead of exhorting Valkyries over the mountains, she's managing the affairs of wayward girlies on a Western beach. With plenty of verve.

There's William Johnson, a handsome, full-voiced "Doc." He can act as well as sing. There's Judy Tyler, an exotic beaut with rich contralto pipes. And there's an array of striking types in other roles. They all deserve salutes, which an onrushing deadline prevents our bestowing individually.

JO MIELZINER has done simple and atmospheric sets, while Alvin Colt has dressed the motley crew in fitting fashion. Harold Clurman has helped a so-so script with his detailed direction. And Robert Russell Bennett has come up with his usual first-rate orchestrations.

"Pipe Dream" is no dream of a musical, but it will have to do until something better arrives on the Main Stem. After all, there's an advance in the Shubert till of a million and a quarter bucks, which spells click in any language. And that figure is no pipe dream.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

December 1, 1955

THEATER

'Pipe Dream'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN A forthright song called "The Man I Used To Be," the handsome, bearded hero of "Pipe Dream" tells us that he isn't having much fun any more because he's "got a mission now." I wonder if something strangely similar isn't beginning to happen to Rodgers and Hammerstein. All through the thoroughly possible new musical at the Shubert, the authors seem unable to keep their minds on cheerfulness. Philosophy keeps breaking in.

Right off the bat there's a sturdy, but fairly sober, number explaining that the lowest creatures of the sea—starfish, crabs, lobsters, the lot of them—are all vitally necessary to somebody. This is immediately followed by a further tribute to our turbulent hard-shelled friends in "The Tide Pool," pointing out that if you look close enough you can see the "stupid sons of fishes lousing up the sea."

Shortly thereafter the ragged denizens of The Palace Flophouse bestir themselves from their barrels and bunks to explain that they're all living their lives on a "Lopsided Bus." All they do, we are informed, is "rattle along and try to find our way," while "our hearts get lousy with hope." A little later, Helen Traubel helps push along the love story by convincing a wayward and frightened lass that, since she can walk by the sea and inhale the good, fresh air, she does have some sort of identity. ("If I am something that can do all this, why should I be ashamed to be me?"). And deep in the second act one of the zanier residents of Cannery Row is creasing his brow and—with almost no trace of comedy—meditating on the perils of "Thinkin.'"

• • •

Every bit of this, it should be quickly said, is accompanied by light, deft, sometimes wonderfully melodic improvisation by Richard Rodgers. And sometimes the music is able to take such firm hold of the proceedings that genuine gayety rears its welcome head. As a trumpet blares out the giddy notes of a "Bums' Opera," a spindly no-good in red suspenders, bandana, blue flannel shirt and obtrusive long winter underwear manages to set the stage writhing. When the heroine, out on her first 'legitimate' date, gets helpful hints in deportment from the orchestra, the old R & H sparkle is in evidence once more. The spectacle of Helen Traubel as a local madam sitting picturesquely among her girls and wishing everybody a Merry Christmas "from our house" is winning indeed.

But the frolicsome moments are rare: the story of how a bunch of the easygoing madmen of Monterey get together to help their scientific pal "Doc" get both a microscope and a wife is told at a sluggish pace, virtually unrelieved by dancing, and in a staid, straight-faced style that seems light-miles away from the raffish and roaring Steinbeck original. Nor is there sustained emotional interest to take up the slack: the boys tend to go their way, the girls theirs, and runners work between them to relay the plot. "Pipe Dream" moves in a curious hush.

There is no lack of professional polish. Jo Mielziner's skeletonized drawings for the Bear Flag Cafe and neighboring institutions are as airy and attractive as the curtain on which he has, in subdued tones, scrawled the junk heap that is Cannery Row. The Oscar Hammerstein lyrics are superbly efficient even when they are insisting that life is real, life is earnest.

Bill Johnson struts vigorously in his flopping boots and sings with effortless simplicity the already popular "All at Once You Love Her." Helen Traubel, possibly miscast as a hearty, rip-snorting mother to all men, is wonderfully game. If the red shoes, riotous earrings, and heavily fringed gowns fail to seem native to her, she still has a twinkle for a tune like "The Happiest House on the Block" and the right sort of heart for a weightier job called "Suzy is a Good Thing." Judy Tyler is pretty and spirited as a girl who may have to spend the night in an old boiler, and she makes a very nice thing out of "Everybody's Got a Home But Me."

The people are capable, the material keeps promising to turn into a party. But someone seems to have forgotten to bring along that gallon jug of good, red wine.

Journal American

December 1, 1955

Fails to Meet R & H Norm

Score of New Musical Pleases

But Story Line Misses Mark

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE personnel and the manner of life in John Steinbeck's Cannery Row, a segment of Monterey, Calif., has afforded me delight since the author first turned his talents toward these waggish indigents. Then, when it was announced that Rodgers and Hammerstein, no less, would fashion a musical from this material I guess I expected too much. For I do not believe that "Pipe Dream," which opened at the Shubert Theatre last night, is up to their high standard.

Perhaps the task was unattainable. Only at rare intervals did the sense of mockery come through; the characters were there, but their small loyalties and involvements became lost in a story which could never keep close enough to the central theme to be engrossing. Boy meets girl, sure, but who cares? There was never the slightest interest in why, or by what means they get together.

Story Loses

We are asked to become intrigued by a young scientist who collects undersea specimens and peddles them to colleges and museums, and his affection for a wandering girl who drifts into town and finds a haven with the local madam. There are the wonderful bums who live in the local flop house and pledge their allegiance to the Dos, and there is the madam, who is devoted to making this incipient romance flower. As reported in Steinbeck's "Sweet Thursday" it is an hilarious and moving tale; at the Shubert it is something less.

On the bright side of the ledger it must be recorded that this is a good R & H score: they have good numbers in "All Kinds of People," "Sweet Thursday" and "All At Once You Love Her." There is a rousing comedy interlude in the first act called "The Bums' Opera," which sets a key which one hopes will be followed but isn't. The big masquerade ball in the second act was, in my estimation, disappointing.

Lacked Power

Helen Traubel, as the madam, unveils her operatic pipes at frequent intervals, but it seemed to me she lacked power last night. Bill Johnson, in the role of the romantic aquarian, can deliver a song and swagger engagingly about the premises, but there was nothing in the script to make us root for him. Judy Tyler, the love interest, is an attractive young girl with a completely acceptable voice, period.

Jo Mielziner has produced a series of agreeable sets and Alvin Colt's costumes are soothing. But this is a far cry from the exalted talents of the team that produced "South Pacific." They must be human, after all.

"Janus"

Daily Mirror

November 25, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Margaret Sullavan In Plymouth Farce

• Top-flight cast deals with a very special situation in new de Liagre offering.

"Janus" is like some chiffon pies we've tried in our time. Fluffy, but not very filling. Pretty on the outside, but tasteless when you dig in. If Hollywood buys it, we can only wonder how a Coast megaphoner will get around its basic situation. For, to put it bluntly, it deals with adultery. In fact, it condones it.

* * *

IN THE NEW arrival at the Plymouth Theatre, Carolyn Green tells of a married woman, with children, who slips away from Seattle to Greenwich Village every Summer, to collaborate with an Andover instructor, also with children, on sexy best-sellers —lurid romances with historical backgrounds. He supplies the research, and she the snappy wordage.

It looks at first as though it might all be platonic, but when her husband a shipping tycoon, pops in unexpectedly, the truth comes out. There has been collaboration, it appears, in more ways than one. In the end, however, the husband decides to keep his wife, and blink his eyes at the dual relationship.

In case you've been wondering what the title means, Janus refers to a two-faced god of mythology. He represents the pseudonym under which the escapists type their books with factual bones and fictional skins. As for the play, it's "The Little Hut" of a couple of seasons ago, transferred from a desert island to Washington Square. And it's about as credible.

* * *

PRODUCER Alfred de Liagre has assembled a top-flight cast, which director Reginald Denham uses most skilfully. The players are so adroit that they almost succeed in turning a light-weight farce into a comedy with a wallop. To their credit, they wring laughs — robust ones — from lines that really aren't very funny.

Margaret Sullavan breezes through the three acts with disarmingly wide-eyed innocence. She just can't realize why everyone should be so darned upset by her little seven-year fling. Robert Preston, a real take-over trouper, is excellent as the perplexed husband. Claude Dauphin is just right as the meek prep-school teacher who knows what he wants and gets it.

Robert Emhardt, a good character actor, has amusing moments as an internal revenue agent, baffled by some of the cockeyedest customers he's ever encountered in the line of duty. And Mary Finney provokes a chuckle or two, as a knowing literary agent.

* * *

De LIAGRE IS ONE of our more reliable and reputable producers. He has given us some of our biggest hits. But, in this instance, his judgement seems to have been a bit off. For "Janus" is not up to his own high standards. Frankly, we were disappointed.

"JANUS"

Comedy by Carolyn Green; staged by Reginald Denham; setting and lighting by Donald Oenslager; presented by Alfred De Liagre Jr. at the Plymouth Theatre, November 24, 1955. The cast:

Jessica.....Margaret Sullavan
Denny.....Claude Dauphin
Miss Addy.....Mary Finney
Gil.....Robert Preston
Mr. Harper....Robert Emhardt

Journal American

November 25, 1955

'Janus' Has Look of Hit

Margaret Sullavan at Her Best in a Laugh-Getter

By JOHN McCLAIN

MRS. CAROLYN GREEN, a Pennsylvania housewife and mother, has written what she calls a romantic comedy which Alfred de Liagre Jr., presented last night at the Plymouth Theatre. It is called "Janus" and it stars Margaret Sullavan, Robert Preston and Claude Dauphin; I believe it will be a success.

The author has an acknowledged gift for farce. She has taken an extremely tenuous and sometimes implausible idea and, riding roughshod over many small matters of logic, has yet managed to put together enough wry philosophy and waggish situations to keep the customers in a reasonable state of amusement for the required stanzas. If her charade tapers off at the end and bogs down in an ending of utmost inconvenience, there can still be the excuse that by this time everything is crazy all over.

For Mrs. Green's plot is not exactly built on bedrock. Her characters are apt to do things because it would be funnier that way, rather than because they are rational people, impelled by logical behavior.

Domestic Tangle

The wife of a West Coast shipping executive has spent a couple of months each Summer living in New York with a prep school professor while they collaborate on a series of historical best selling novels. Comes the inevitable moment when the husband walks in and discovers all this, a situation complicated by the fact that coincidentally the Internal Revenue man has also arrived to investigate the taxes of the twain.

It is at this point that the story seems to waver between a consideration of the love story and the threat of exposure and publicity resulting from an income tax scandal.

Under less expert auspices the entire proceedings might easily dry up and drift away. But this would be figuring on less immaculate services than those supplied by Miss Sullavan, Mr. Preston, M. Dauphin and Reginald Denham, who directed. It seemed to me that these people succeeded in a form of hypnosis which masked the blurred interludes; by the time we're into the second act we don't much care what explicit sense is being made—we like the people.

Miss Sullavan is at her engaging best as the wife who has an ill-contrived philosophy which somehow makes this sustained love affair seem the most feasible conduct possible. Mr. Preston, who has been on the inner fringes of success as a jut-jawed farceur, comes entirely to life in this piece. This is his best to date. And Claude Dauphin, as the dedicated and amorous pedant, is consistently beguiling and comical.

Other contributions of enormous importance to the general hilarity are offered by Mary Finney and Robert Emhardt, who complete the cast.

Donald Oenslager has devised a simple and effective set, a brownstone off Washington Square.

"Janus" will not echo through the years as a memorable farce, but it is a cinch to keep the Plymouth lit up for many a moon.

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

November 25, 1955

'Janus,' a French-style Farce, Boasts a Slick and Shiny Cast

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Janus was a Roman deity in charge of doors and he was represented in portraits as having two faces because doors have two faces—In and Out. The Janus of last night's new play at the Plymouth, "Janus," is a jane named Margaret Sullavan. She always has the same pretty face but she does have two careers, and so it seems reasonable that she should have one man for each career, making a total of two gents.

This play by Carolyn Green is called in the program a romantic comedy, but what it really amounts to is an old-style French sex farce. Thanks to some extremely clever farcical playing by Miss Sullavan, Robert Preston, Claude Dauphin, Robert Emhardt and Mary Finney, and thanks also to several funny situations and lines by Miss Green, "Janus" is an enjoyably light-minded contribution to our booming theatre. It has a number of structural faults, but every time it is on the point of collapsing the author or the actors rush in and prop it up with something cheerful.

Dumbwaiter Service

I shall now try to give you the plot in a few crisp sentences—just in case you should like to try making a play out of it some time. Sullavan lives in a Washington Square walkup. Dauphin lives upstairs. When she wants him for the purposes of collaboration—cerebral or animal—she jabs a broomstick at her ceiling and he comes down in the dumbwaiter.

Dauphin is an underpaid teacher of French, husband of one and father of two. Sullavan, wife of one and mother of two, rarely sees her husband (Preston) because he is a shipping magnate and is always off on ships. Dauphin is mad about history and Sullavan endorses sex. What could be more natural than for the two of them to get together over a hot typewriter and write historical novels? He puts down a paragraph of sober historical fact about Charles V or somebody and then she writes one about a girl with billowing bosoms, and before the Book-of-the-Month Club knows it, it has another thousand-page best-seller on its clutching hands.

Stylish Performances

Of course, Sullavan's husband, Preston, has to turn up and the French farce begins. The farce has a joyful American complication when Emhardt, a serious watchdog from the Bureau of Internal Revenue, breaks in to accuse Dauphin, underpaid teacher but overpaid novelist, of falsifying his tax return. Dauphin, he charges sternly, has not claimed enough exemptions and deductions.

Miss Green, the author, keeps this nonsense going fairly well . . . but I don't think her play would get very far without its cast. As directed by Reginald Denham, the actors are giving beautifully light and stylish performances. Miss Sullavan is bewitching, Dauphin is amusingly guileless, Preston is an expert at the dead pan and the double-take, and Emhardt is my favorite revenue agent. Miss Finney, in the role of an author's agent, delivers a sly and wickedly amusing lecture on what is going to happen to sex in the next century or two.

P. S.: "Janus" is utterly immoral, as French-style farces are supposed to be, and Miss Sullavan gets to keep both her men.

The New York Times

November 25, 1955

The Theatre: 'Janus'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SINCE "farce" is an opprobrious epithet in the theatre, let's call "Janus" a comedy—in fact, "a romantic comedy," the program says.

The correctness of the label makes no visible difference. For Carolyn Green's three-act foolishness, which opened at the Plymouth last evening, is breezy and entertaining in a thoroughly professional style. She has written it like a professional, pursuing a frivolous situation with deadly seriousness once the preliminaries are out of the way.

And Margaret Sullavan, Robert Preston and Claude Dauphin give hilariously professional performances under the sound professional direction of Reginald Denham. Sometimes a comedy is lucky to be sustained by sturdy performers. But on this occasion play and performers are equal partners in a royal good time. Everybody concerned is crack-brained in a very pleasant theatrical way.

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The Janus in the title refers to a married man and a married woman who collaborate in the writing of rich, oozy, successful novels. The point is that they are not married to each other. She is married to a shipping tycoon in Seattle. He is married to a termagant in Andover, Mass., where he teaches school. During two months in the summer, they sneak off to Washington Square where they collaborate on novels—collaborate in general, as a matter of fact. No one knows about what they are doing. Even their agent assumes that they are married to each other. "Janus" is a trade-name that masks a literary mystery.

That is the situation that Miss Green poses in the raised-eyebrows style of farce—half romance, half vaudeville, with two or three more halves thrown in to keep everything lively. Almost instantly her husband turns up unexpectedly. Soon afterwards an income tax investigator turns up to ask disturbing questions about two of the strangest tax returns he has ever examined.

For the rest of the evening "Janus" squares the circle in the highest good humor. Miss Green can write witty dialogue when she wants to. But most of the dialogue seriously develops the emotional crises that result from the situation. It is upside-down humor, and consistently funny.

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No one is likely to disentagle it from the performances. All the actors are in fine fettle. As the lady attracted irresistibly to two men at the same time, Miss Sullavan plays with great bravura, all temperament and desperation, very slender and beautiful, too. Mr. Preston has a part that is ideal for him. That bull-dog aggressiveness that was so funny in "The Male Animal" is uproarious again. He plays with bluster and comic earnestness.

As the man of letters on a general holiday, Mr. Dauphin is the perfect contrast—mild, meek, worried, with occasional lapses into shaky bravado. The two minor parts are played by two actors who never give commonplace performances—Mary Finney as a gawky, hearty, aggressive authors' agent, and Robert Emhardt as an officious but querulous investigator for the income tax bureau. Donald Oenslager has provided a Washington Square apartment that is seedy and eccentric enough for five comedians to romp through in good spirits.

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Fortunately, Miss Green does not go very deep into the literary quality of the novel her furtive authors are writing. Despite what she says, the Book-of-the-Month Club would be crazy to have anything to do with it. But theatregoers with giddy minds will not be crazy if they give their custom to "Janus" for the rest of the season. It is wild and enjoyable.

New York Herald Tribune

November 25, 1955

THEATER

'Janus'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN "WILL SUCCESS SPOIL ROCK HUNTER?" there is a great deal of talk about a standard Hollywood device which is known as having the lovers "meet cute." Although all of the lovers in "Janus," the new comedy at the Plymouth, have certainly met before, it seems to me that the "meet cute" principle is hard at work all evening.

Margaret Sullavan, as a thoroughly respectable wife and mother, breezes into a dingy New York apartment, sweeps the dust-covers off the furniture, raps out a staccato signal on the ceiling with a broom, and then waits to meet the man she is going to spend the next two months with. He arrives in a dumbwaiter, slowly lowered to disclose him cross-legged, beaming, and with a pot of flowers to offer as a "homecoming present."

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When Miss Sullavan's husband—in this instance Robert Preston—bursts inadvertently upon the scene, he arrives by courtesy of an ocean liner, a helicopter, and Washington, D. C. (We don't see all this, of course, but it makes a likely story.) And when an income-tax inspector turns up to investigate the various unrelated menages these airy folk are running, he doesn't come for the customary reasons: he is on hand to point out how seriously and how stupidly they are overpaying the government.

Come to think of it, practically everything in "Janus" *is* cute. The basic idea is attractive—Miss Sullavan slips away from home and family for two months out of every year to collaborate with a friendly French teacher on best-selling novels and various other things—and the incidental gimmicks that author Carolyn Green throws in along the way are almost always pleasantly impudent. On top of that, the three principals are as amiable a bunch of innocents as Actors' Equity can provide.

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Miss Sullavan, for instance, is not only as fresh and as slender as a wayward daisy, she is charmingly addle-pated in every moral crisis. Pouting prettily as she announces that she has been "faithfully unfaithful," blinking thoughtfully as she ditches hundred-dollar bills in a wastebasket, or glowering fiercely as she pounds out the first paragraphs of a novel ("We'll open with Kate washing her hair in the clear, rushing waters of the Danube,") she is blandly fey and thoroughly fetching.

Robert Preston, as the husband who has just discovered how prolific a woman can be, seems to be turning into a minor genius in deadpan art. Mr. Preston has a dozen altogether different glazed expressions, plus some thirty or forty varying vocal pitches indicating horror. Every time his mouth sags, or his lip quivers, or his words hiss out like escaping steam, "Janus" is very funny.

And Claude Dauphin has a wonderfully worried face for the kind of helpless explaining he must do. Confronted with an irrelevant and expostulating husband, he blinks wistfully, grins sheepishly, frowns sympathetically, and then lets the light die out of his face like a flickering candle. Mr. Dauphin has, in addition, a shrug that somehow or other involves his whole body, beginning with his left foot, coursing up through his shoulders, and at last settling in his right foot, wistful and defeated. Though the author lets the part itself run downhill, the actor is consistently delightful.

To complete the credits, there is a bright, cheerful, properly smirking performance from Robert Emhardt as an inexplicably generous income-tax man, and a breezy salvo from Mary Finney as a literary agent with "the courage of her commissions."

But there is, I think, something missing, and the answer may lie lurking in the snatch of dialogue just quoted. Miss Green has set up a very nice situation for the American equivalent of French farce; she has found just the right people to sail through it lightly; but she has never quite got the quips up off a middle-grade domestic level, and in this sort of skylarking chuckles aren't enough.

"Janus" simmers agreeably, but it just won't explode.